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Exploring the Strengths and Challenges of Co-creation of Impact Assessments/ Analysis In Rural Communities: Focus: Hotel con Corazón in Granada, Nicaragua

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Exploring the Strengths and Challenges of Co-creation of Impact Assessments/ Analysis
In Rural Communities:
Focus: Hotel con Corazón in Granada, Nicaragua

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PIM 75

A Capstone Paper Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the requirements for a Master of
Intercultural Service, Leadership and Management at SIT Graduate Institute in Brattleboro,
Vermont, USA.

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ABSTRACT

Hotel con Corazón, a boutique hotel and social enterprise located in Granada, Nicaragua, through its Foundation, invests 100 percent of its profits in local education programs to empower students, their families and the community to build brighter futures. The Foundation works within a rural locality 20 minutes outside of the city, where the majority of the 3,900 inhabitants live in moderate to severe economic poverty. Completing its eighth year of working in the Las Lagunas community, the Foundation was motivated to carry out an impact assessment in order to learn more about the experiences of the different groups of stakeholders involved and improve the programs.

From October 2016 to April 2017, I worked with the program staff at Hotel con Corazón to design and implement an impact assessment, a study that investigates changes brought about by an intervention (a program, project, activity, etc.) seeking to understand both the positive and negative effects. We intended to use an innovative methodology and research tool that was designed in the Netherlands, where I had spent the preceding three months learning about the process. In Nicaragua there are approximately 3,500 NGOs working towards alleviating and ending the social problems that many Nicaraguans face. Many of these NGOs are founded and run by foreigners and use a more top-down approach, instead of a bottom-up framework, utilizing local knowledge and expertise to create more sustainable solutions. Because of this experience, I framed this research paper around the central question: How can co-creation processes in impact assessments serve as a tool for empowerment, capacity building and sustainable solutions in rural communities?

The impact assessment included interviewing 100 stakeholders and also a conducting a small focus group involving seven community members. After the evaluation was complete, I reviewed existing literature on the topics of co-creation and participatory Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E), and interviewed several practitioners – both from Nicaragua and from the Netherlands – about their experiences with these methodologies and approaches in conducting collaborative evaluations in the community. Their stories illustrate the benefits and necessity of co-creation in conducting impact assessments in rural communities.

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List of Abbreviations

IE	Impact Evaluation: a study that explores the changes brought about by an intervention (a program, project, activity, etc.) and is different than many other types of evaluation because, instead of focusing on the intermediate outcomes of an intervention, impact assessments strive to understand the “positive and negative, intended and unintended, direct and indirect, primary and secondary effects produced by an intervention or program” (Rogers, 2012, p.2).
IA	Impact Assessment: Impact assessment is another term for impact evaluation.
M&E	Monitoring and Evaluation: Monitoring is the tracking of project outputs and outcomes as indicators of project effectiveness, or the extent to which the project achieves its stated objectives. (USAID). Evaluation in this context can be defined as the systematic and objective assessment of a planned, on-going or completed project, program or policy, its design, implementation and results. (OECD/DAC Glossary)
NGO	Non Governmental Organization: A non-governmental organization (NGO) is a non-profit, citizen-based group that functions independently of government. NGOs, sometimes called civil societies, are organized on community, national and international levels to serve specific social or political purposes, and are cooperative, rather than commercial, in nature.
PM&E	Participatory Monitoring and Evaluation: Participatory monitoring & evaluation (PM&E) is a process through which stakeholders at various levels engage in monitoring or evaluating a particular Project, program or policy, share control over the content, the process and the results of the monitoring and evaluation activity and engage in taking or identifying corrective actions. PM&E focuses on the active engagement of primary stakeholders. (Sswm.info)
PAR	Participatory Action Research: a participatory, democratic process that seeks to bring together action and reflection, theory and practice, in participation with others, in the pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern to people in their communities. The characteristics of PAR are people-oriented, community involvement and collaboration, cooperation with each other to conduct the research project in order to find a solution to a problem, and implementation of action steps.
PIA	Participatory Impact Assessment: The concept of participatory impact assessment (PIA) is a process of evaluation of the impacts of development interventions which is carried out under the full or joint control of local communities in partnership with professional practitioners. In PIA, community representatives participate in the definition of impact indicators, the collection of data, the analysis of data, the communication of assessment findings, and especially, in post-assessment actions designed to improve the impact of the development interventions in the locality.

INTRODUCTION

This research paper examines the importance of carrying out impact assessments as a means to understand change, assess effectiveness and to grow and learn. The research will explore the strengths and challenges of co-creating and conducting impact assessments through the lived experiences of practitioners and professionals who have implemented collaborative evaluations and assessments with rural communities.

From October 2016 to April 2017, I worked with Hotel con Corazón (Hotel with a Heart), a boutique hotel located in Granada, Nicaragua. This hotel also serves as a social enterprise, as “an operator in the social economy whose main objective is to have a social impact (address a social need or work towards social change) rather than make a profit for its owners or shareholders” (Carsou et al, 2016, p.3). Hotel con Corazón invests 100 percent of its profits into local educational programs to empower students, their families and the community to build brighter futures.

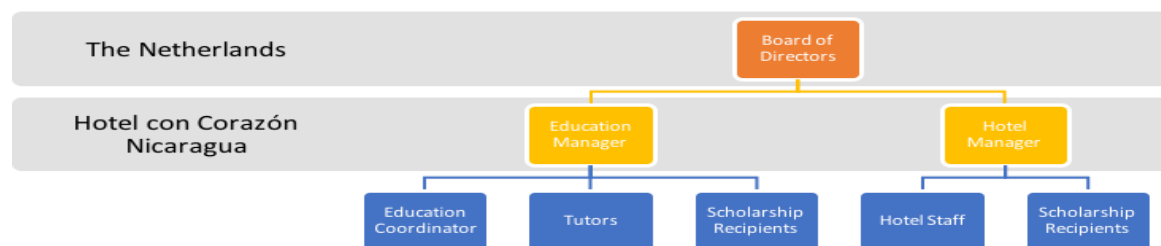
I was connected with this opportunity when I met the former managers of Hotel con Corazón while in Oaxaca, Mexico, doing an independent study in 2015. Because of my background in education and Spanish, pursuing my masters’ degrees in Intercultural Service Leadership and Management, interest in developing skills in monitoring and evaluation, and passion for hearing peoples’ stories, they recommended me to work on the design and implementation of an impact assessment in order to gain a better understanding of how the students, parents, tutors and other stakeholders were experiencing the programs and how these efforts may be changing their lives and the community at large.

Before arriving in Nicaragua, I spent three months in the Netherlands with Perspectivity, an organization that specializes in the facilitation of complex group processes and organizational

learning. The objective of my work with Perspectivity was to prepare to conduct the impact assessment in Nicaragua, and learn how to implement an innovative methodology and research tool called “Sprockler,” which uses story-based inquiries in research studies, monitoring & evaluation, and impact assessments. The methodology was designed by two professionals, Lisette Gast and Anne Van Marwijk, who worked for Perspectivity.

To provide a brief organizational background, Hotel con Corazón provides jobs and incentives (health benefits, a salary bonus for educational purposes/tuition) for a staff of 22, which includes receptionists, tour guides, housekeeping, chefs, maintenance, baristas and a manager on the hotel side. For the education programs, there are six tutors, a coordinator and manager. The hotel was founded by two Dutch entrepreneurs and has a board of directors located in the Netherlands, whose main responsibilities include fundraising, marketing, business and education development. The hotel’s educational and social side is called “Foundation Hotel con Corazón.”

For reference:

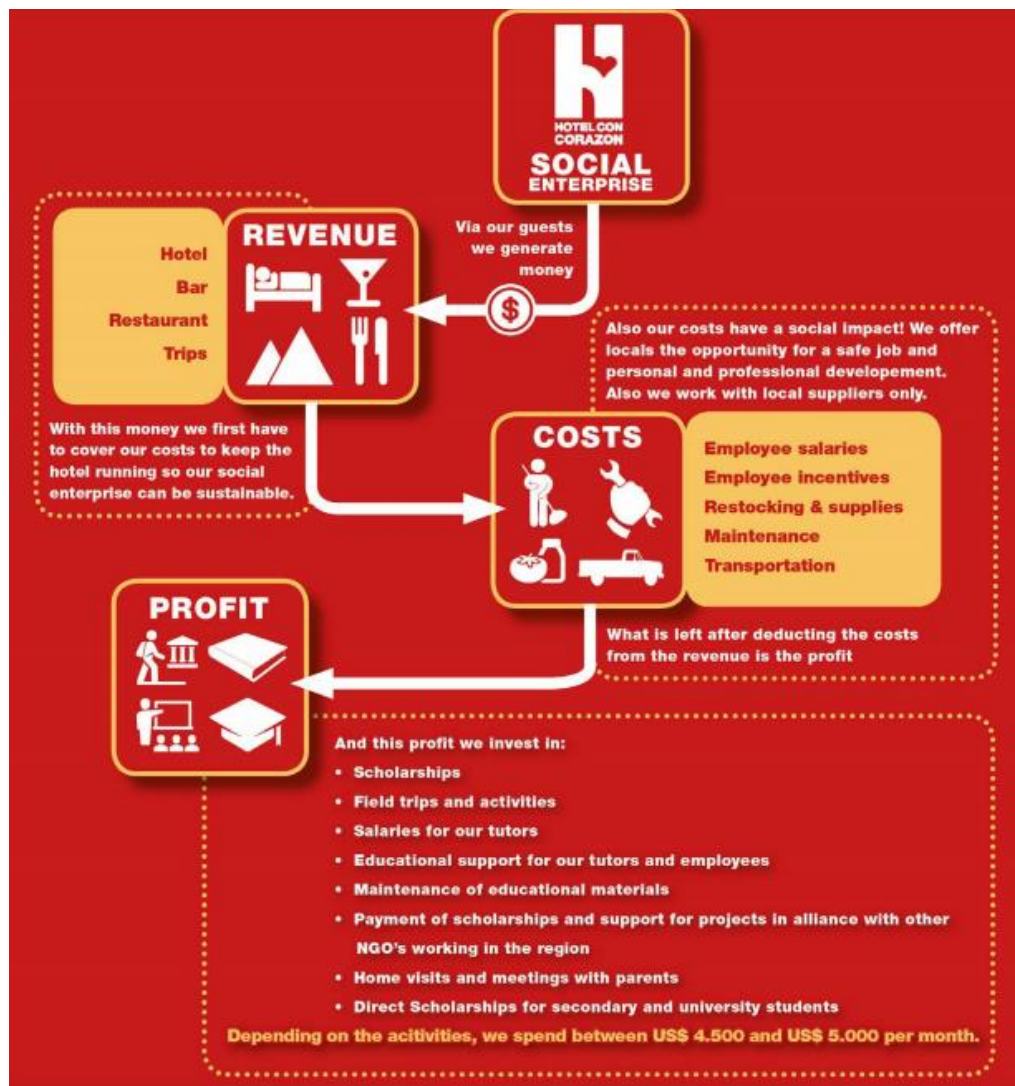


The tutors work within Las Lagunas, a rural locality 20 minutes outside of the city, where the majority of the 3,900 inhabitants live in moderate to severe economic poverty, existing on less than two dollars a day, with high levels of unemployment and many barriers to gaining access to quality healthcare, education, shelter and transportation (Cordero Jarquín, 2015). Hotel con

Corazón and the community work towards their vision of increasing the quality of life and ultimately breaking the cycle of poverty through a variety of educational strategies:

- Tutoring and extra-curricular activities
- Home visits and parent workshops
- Scholarships for secondary and university students
- Collaboration with other NGOs

The following is a visual representation of how the social enterprise functions:



After completing the eighth year of working in the Las Lagunas community, the board of directors and foundation wanted to take a closer look at whether or not their efforts were making a difference. There are also plans to open two more “Hotel con Corazóns” in the next few years, thus they wanted to demonstrate to future investors the value of the initiative and its programs.

To give a brief description of the framework that was chosen for the impact assessment, Sprockler utilizes storytelling to understand people’s experiences, and because people may interpret different stories in their own way, Sprockler asks the storytellers themselves to give meaning to their stories. It does this through the use of “bipoles” and “tripoles,” which are the special question types that “ask for intuitive and instinctive answers and allow the respondent to give answers in the grey areas between the multiple choice options” (sprockler.com). I was convinced that this was going to be an ideal methodology because this approach empowers the storyteller to have more ownership over his/her story and interpretation.

While in the Netherlands the developers of Sprockler showed me various examples of different Sprockler inquiries and project plans that they had used in other places. I carried out a Sprockler information session for the Hotel con Corazón board members so they could learn about the methodology, provide suggestions, and ideas and hopes for the project. My supervisor and I worked together to come up with what we believed were meaningful questions that would allow us to learn more about the impact of the program, and create a participatory process that would involve all groups of stakeholders: parents, scholarship recipients, primary and secondary students, teachers, tutors, and former participants. We wrote up a detailed plan for how we envisioned the project and different possibilities for who would interview who, where and when we could possibly hold the interview sessions, the questions that we could ask and activities we could use to introduce the project and how to conduct the inquiries. We e-mailed the team in

Granada with the project plan and a list of preparations that would need to be made before I arrived. We did this with the intention of helping and “making things easier on them.” We knew that the tutors, the educational coordinator and director were busy with clases and daily activities, as elections were just around the corner and it hadn’t yet been determined how long schools were going to be closed.

After sending the e-mail, we didn’t hear back from the team for more than a week. I was eager for a response, but assumed that they had a lot of things going on. When I finally received a reply from the education manager, she explained that the team was concerned and frustrated with the plan. They felt that the plan was not appropriate or relevant for the context, that the questions were not going to be understood by the participants, and it would be time consuming for the tutors to be involved as they have their regular responsibilities to attend to. We arranged a Skype session to discuss these concerns and how we could adapt the plan to the setting, and even though we were thousands of miles apart in distance, I could sense the tension and irritation from the group.

I realized that this was one of the biggest planning missteps that could have been avoided had we used better communication and taken the time to discuss our objectives for the project. If we had collaborated with the team and asked questions from the beginning, we could’ve worked together to discuss and decide on which methodology would be most suitable for the culture and location, designing a logistic plan that was actually feasible, and demonstrating that we really cared about their perspective and participation. This idea is also strongly emphasized in the article *New Trends in Development Education*, where Balikirev (et al., 2006) explains that:

Evaluators must understand the implications of their actions and be sensitive to the concerns of the project director, staff and other stakeholders. This understanding is achieved in an ongoing, two-way dialogue with the involvement of all the group members. While an evaluation should be rigorous in design, data collection and analysis,

the evaluator must remain open-minded and ready to welcome and adopt the flexibility required by stakeholders.

Upon reflection, I realized how important it is to first build relationships and trust, to collaborate and learn about the culture and context in order to have an effective and worthwhile impact assessment. In retrospect, I would have come to Nicaragua first to learn about and understand the reality and focus on building relationships. I would have asked questions about what type of methodology the team thought would help us achieve project objectives, as well as take into consideration the culture and comfort level of participants, what skills and abilities that the local team already has and wants to improve upon.

The dynamics of privilege and power was another aspect of this project that really stood out to me throughout this experience. Although the approach and project plan was designed with the best intentions, I believe that one of the frustrations that the team felt was a result of feeling that our ideas and methodologies were being imposed on them and that “we know better.” When I say “we,” I mean many of the Westerners who are involved in development work here. Nicaragua is the most impoverished country in Central America as a result of colonization, exploitation and corruption. There are now approximately 3,500 NGOS that exist in the country to work towards alleviating and ending the social problems that many Nicaraguans face. Many of these NGOS are founded and run by foreigners and use a more top-down approach, instead of a bottom-up framework, utilizing local knowledge and expertise to create more sustainable solutions. As I mentioned before, this was supposed to be a very participatory project, with all groups involved in the inquiry process. I didn’t think about whether or not people would feel comfortable or not carrying out the interviews because of the cultural and social environment.

When I arrived in Granada, they explained that they actually did not want to conduct any inquiries and felt that it would be better if I did them instead. Even though I knew that I would

most likely receive different answers had I been a member of the community, and that most of the interviewees would tell me what they thought I wanted to hear, I didn't want to pressure the team to do anything that they didn't want to do.

After doing more research on cultural characteristics, specifically reading Geert Hofstede's studies on different cultural dimensions, I realized that Nicaraguans have a higher level on the Power Distance Index, between 85-95, meaning that they accept that people accept and feel comfortable with hierarchy and unequal distributions of power (geert-hofstede.com). Both the Netherlands and the U.S. have lower power distance and value equality and believe in the importance of discussion and sharing in the decision-making process. Becoming aware of this (after the fact) made it easier to understand why most of the individuals I worked with felt more comfortable having me in charge and not wanting to express their doubts, concerns or different ideas (especially if they are accustomed to always having a foreign supervisor make the decisions and lead). Had we co-created and collaborated on the project plan, perhaps the Hotel con Corazón education team would have taken more ownership and we would have been able to more effectively engage the community in all steps of the process.

Sprockler is a methodology and tool for adaptive learning that can and has been used in many different places around the world with people from many different backgrounds, age groups, culture and level of education. Although the project faced challenges in Granada, overall a lot of learning took place. The final impact report (see annex) includes some of the stories that were shared, illustrates the themes that emerged, and hopes and goals for the future. The full online interactive report can be explored at: <http://sprockler.com/reports/hotelconcorazon/index-en-adults.php>.

The initial interview process with stakeholders lasted a month as there were also difficulties in finding the time and space to carry out the interviews. We interviewed 55 students in primary school, 15 secondary students, 10 scholarship recipients, 3 ex-participants, 10 mothers, and 7 tutors. The majority of the interviews took place at the schools as transportation to houses would be time-consuming and challenging as they all lived very far. We noticed that many of the children and parents did indeed, have difficulties answering the questions. The scholarship recipients, all whom have a higher level of education, were able to answer the questions with more ease and demonstrated higher critical-thinking abilities. It seemed that many people felt pressure to “say the right thing” and only share positive stories. As expected, everyone shared encouraging stories about their experiences, with no suggestions for changes or improvement. At first this frustrated me, because I thought to myself, “Well, how are we going to improve if no one will admit what we are lacking or doing wrong?” My supervisor during my time in the Netherlands made a great point that we can focus on our strengths and what the program is doing well and build on that. We have to trust and respect the stories and information that people want to share, believe in their capabilities and not always feel the need to fix or change things. We must remember that everything can be seen as a learning experience and that people are doing the best that they can with what they have and know!

The tutors realized that many of the questions that we implemented required a certain level of critical thinking and reflection, which are skills that the majority of the students have not developed. This opened their eyes to the need for more activities to practice these skills and the importance of reflection for growth, learning and transformation, and that it is something that needs to be practiced – in class and with each other.

The other interviewers and I discussed this afterwards and realized that many people may have felt as if they were being evaluated or judged, that perhaps they didn't feel comfortable sharing their stories with someone they had just met, or because of power dynamics.

Reflecting on the process I started to think about what could have been done differently to improve the process. Although it was participatory to a certain extent, it still felt like a "top-down" approach, rather than working with the groups of stakeholders to determine what we all wanted to learn from this project and engage everyone in all stages of the process. This experience motivated me to learn more about different approaches and frameworks for M&E in the international development field, methodologies that are based on collaboration and mutual learning.

Part of this unease about the consultative participation also stemmed from my own experience. Before attending SIT, I worked for seven years as an ESL instructor for children and adults in Mexico, Guatemala, Minnesota and South Korea. I learned through my time as an instructor that student were much more engaged, interested, motivated and successful when we "co-created" classes: deciding on topics that were of interest and what students needed and wanted to learn, creating and conducting self, group and teacher assessments and evaluations of our progress, and carrying out projects that involved everyone. And I, as the teacher felt that this process benefited me just as much!

I knew that the results of the Las Lagunas impact assessment were going to be shared primarily with potential investors of two new Hotel con Corazóns, but I felt uncomfortable with the fact that this wasn't a collaborative effort within the community. Although participants were able to share their stories and express their opinions about the project, their involvement still seemed passive and consultative, instead of being an engaging and transformative one. Because

of this experience, I became interested in learning more about effective and collaborative impact assessments.

This is what led me to my research question:

What are the strengths and challenges of co-creating impact assessments in rural communities, and furthermore, how can these co-creative processes serve as a tool for empowerment, capacity building and sustainable solutions?

LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review seeks to provide definitions of the different concepts and to provide an overview of the current literature on this topic. I explored the M&E (Monitoring and Evaluation) concepts of impact assessments and co-creation, the characteristics of rural communities, and how Participatory Monitoring and Evaluation (PM&E) can be used as a means to empower and build capacity in these communities. I also briefly describe gaps in the literature.

What is an impact assessment?

It is important to note that there are different names for impact assessments, such as impact evaluations, impact analysis, and impact studies, but they all have overlapping definitions. Therefore, for the purpose of this research, I will use the term “impact assessment.” In the guidebook, “Introduction to Impact Evaluation” by Interaction, a global development agency, it is defined as a study that explores the changes brought about by an intervention (a program, project, activity, etc.) and is different than many other types of evaluation because, instead of focusing on the intermediate outcomes of an intervention, impact assessments strive to understand the “positive and negative, intended and unintended, direct and indirect, primary and secondary effects produced by an intervention or program” (Rogers, 2012, p.2). In the article,

“Who Counts Reality: Participatory Monitoring and Evaluation: A Literature Review,” Gaventa and Estrella, two researchers who specialize in community power studies describe the function of impact assessments as “...evaluating the impact of a given programme and the changes that have occurred as a result of program initiatives. Assessing project impacts can help distinguish whether or not (a) project interventions are in fact achieving their identified objectives, whether or not (b) program objectives remain relevant over time (c) the best action strategies have been pursued” (1998, p.7).

Why are impact assessments important?

Impact assessments are important for many different reasons. In general, these reasons can be put into two different categories: accountability and lesson-learning. According to the OECD (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development), “...a properly designed impact evaluation can answer the question of why and how a program is working or not, assist in decisions about innovations and scaling up” (2013, p.1). Interaction, a global development agency, provides further justification for why impact assessments are necessary: “...to decide whether or not to continue or expand an intervention, to learn how to successfully adapt a successful intervention to suit another context, to reassure funders, including donors and taxpayers (upward accountability) that money is being wisely invested. And lastly, “...to inform intended beneficiaries and communities (downward accountability) about whether or not, and in what ways, a program is benefitting the community” (Rugers, 2012, p.3).

While reading many of the definitions and reasons for conducting impact assessments, the focus was principally “top-down,” with the emphasis being placed on the agency, the interventions and external donors, instead of on the most important factor of these evaluations – the people for whom they are supposed to serve. Some of the approaches demonstrate the use of

conventional impact assessment tools and techniques, including the hiring of an external evaluator or professionals to conduct an assessment to ensure objectivity and impartiality. Other perceived advantages of utilizing external consultants or evaluation teams include credibility for people outside the program or project (funding partners, stakeholders, etc.) and expertise; that an “external evaluator or team may possess certain evaluation research skills and knowledge that an internal evaluator may not (evaluationtoolkit.org). While using an external evaluator may be advantageous in some cases, literature shows that many organizations are now moving towards using a more internally-led, community-based, participatory methodology to carry out such assessments.

Who should participate in impact assessments?

As noted previously, Gaventa and Estrella describe a much more inclusive approach to impact assessment called PIA: Participatory Impact Assessment, wherein community members are involved in every step of the evaluation process.

“The concept of participatory impact assessment (PIA) is a process of evaluation of the impacts of development interventions which is carried out under the full or joint control of local communities in partnership with professional practitioners.... In PIA, community representatives participate in the definition of impact indicators, the collection of data, the analysis of data, the communication of assessment findings, and especially, in post-assessment actions designed to improve the impact of the development interventions in the locality” (2010, p. 6).

Estrella and Gaventa summarize the approach by outlining a selection of PIA tools and techniques. They explain that these strategies should:

- Complement the approach and philosophy of the organization.
- Be perceived by community participants as a way to help them address their questions and problems, not simply as information about them gathered by or for outsiders.
- Involve end-users in both data gathering and in analyzing data.
- Match the skills and aptitudes of participants.
- Adapt to fit people’s day-to-day activities and normal responsibilities.
- Provide timely information needed for decision-making.

- Produce results which are reliable and, even if not quantitative, credible enough to convince others.
- Be consistent in complexity and cost to match the level of evaluation called for.
- Reinforce community solidarity, cooperation and involvement.
- Be gender-sensitive.
- Only obtain information that is needed.

The case studies that Gaventa and Estrella share in their literature review demonstrate that when efforts are made by and with the community, there are many benefits. The concept of **empowerment** is a critical part of PM&E: “Empowerment is defined in terms of the degree to which ‘full participative’ involvement in every aspect of design, implementation, interpretation and resulting action is achieved” (Estrella, Gaventa, 1998, p.25). They emphasize the use of participatory evaluation methodologies as “transformative” as it can “empower people through an educational, learning process by which various social groups produce knowledge about their reality, clarify, and articulate their norms and values and reach consensus about further action (‘conscientisation’). (Ibid) Furthermore, literature explains that an evaluation process can be used to dismantle power structures and inequalities through motivating social change and action.

It was validating to come across the article, “Impact Evaluation Matters: Enhanced Learning Through Involving Stakeholders in Oxfam’s Impact Studies,” as the authors’ justification for impact assessments is based on the idea of empowerment. They explain that through impact assessments, and listening to the experiences and reflections of participants, everyone can critically review their work and the impact that was achieved together (Huisman, et al., 2016, p.2). In “Learning from Practice, Changing Lives,” ActionAid India also identifies impact assessments as a necessary element to strengthen organizations and projects and to foster a shared learning practice. However, these impact assessments must be “genuinely participatory: inclusive, empowering and oriented to the future” (p.3, 2012). ActionAid India, with its emphasis on a rights-based approach, believes that it is not negotiable to exclude

stakeholders/community members from the evaluation process as it holds the possibility of marginalized people's empowerment through critical consciousness, organization building, capacity building and advocacy.

Participatory Action Research (PAR) methodology also has congruent underpinnings and has been largely used in rural communities to achieve the goal of sustainable development. PAR, defined by Peter Reason and Hilary Bradbury, is “a participatory, democratic process that seeks to bring together action and reflection, theory and practice, in participation with others, in the pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern to people in their communities” (Cruz, 2013). The characteristics of PAR are people-oriented, community involvement and collaboration, cooperation with each other to conduct the research project in order to find a solution to a problem, and implementation of action steps. Researcher Xunaxi Cruz highlights the idea that when the communities participating are involved in the process and in defining what they want to achieve, they will be more motivated and empowered to use their abilities to generate self sufficiency (2013).

Impact assessments and their different methodologies have evolved and grown to include a wider range of approaches in the past 30 years. From focusing mainly on quantifiable data, there is now much more of an emphasis placed on participation and humanistic approaches that not only rely on numbers in an attempt to understand the impact of a program, but now aim to involve the participation of the stakeholders in all steps of the process. PAR methods have become popular within the M&E world as well as conducting impact assessments. These methods strive to design and carry out research *with* the individuals whose “life world and meaningful actions are under study” (Bergold, J., Thomas, S., 2012). A survey of existing

literature demonstrates that there are many more powerful and important justifications to use participatory approaches to impact assessments and M&E:

- The recognition and a stronger placed value on local or community knowledge, wisdom and expertise
- Sustainability
- Accountability
- Capacity building
- Strengthening organizations and building unity
- Improved communication
- Representation of different stakeholders

What is co-creation?

Similar to the ideas of participation in M&E and impact assessments, the concept of “co-creation” – another term in the field of “co-processes,” which also includes co-design, co-production, co-construction (depending on what field is being discussed) – has become increasingly popular and relevant. Businesses, schools, NGOs, and corporations have recognized that the world is becoming increasingly connected and increasingly complex, and that in order to find solutions to world issues, it is important that people with different perspectives, backgrounds, experiences and knowledge come together to discuss, listen, collaborate and engage in order to promote meaningful change within communities and the larger world.

Some of the co-creation definitions that the literature includes are:

In the business realm, co-creation is seen as the interactions between customers/clients and providers. It is applicable to work within social enterprises or NGOs. “Co-creation is involving your customers or end-users in one or more stages of the innovation process. After all, a profound insight in the needs of your customers and users is crucial to successful products and services that create added value” (SunIdee, 2010).

“An approach to the design of products, processes, programs and business models that create sustainable improvements for people living in poverty at the base of the economic pyramid” (MIT Practical Alliance, 2016, p. 1).

“A co-process for the public good ‘deeply involving stakeholders in identifying all dimensions of the problem and designing and implementing solutions” (Pfitzer, Bocksette and Stamp 2013) and “utilized particularly in the whole effort to improve outcomes for groups of individuals or communities, from start to finish” (Ghate, 2016).

In describing what co-creation processes entails, Ghate explains that the activities involved include “exchanging narratives, active and empathic listening, collaborative analysis and synthesis, and joint engagement in a range of *participatory* undertakings including the generation of new data” (2016). When reading the definitions given for participatory impact assessments, it is clear that the co-creative processes coincide, as they emphasize collaboration and partnerships throughout the *entire* evaluation process, as explained in “Learning from Practice, Changing Lives”: “...stakeholders, poor and marginalized members of the community in particular need to be involved in monitoring, reviewing, and evaluating what progress has been made within programs. They should decide on when and how to monitor, evaluate, analyze and communicate findings. By following this principle, impact assessments can be used as an empowerment program and management tool” (Action Aid India, 2000, p.4).

What are the critiques of participatory methods?

One of the main critiques of some participatory methodologies is that they are disguised as participatory, when in actuality their methods are used to persuade, inform, or manipulate beneficiaries or stakeholders who are seen to have less power - a more top down approach. Arnstein’s ladder of citizen participation (1969) illustrates the eight different levels of engagement and type of participation. To demonstrate a few, there is manipulation on one end of the spectrum (where participants may have to automatically approve already made decisions) to the mid-range consultation (where participants may be asked to share their opinions but will not have much of a say in any decision-making) to partnership (where participants and staff work together to create outcomes) to citizen control (where participants are in charge of initiating and assuming full responsibility for change).

Another main theme I found while surveying the literature is the idea that the process of an impact assessment conducted by external evaluators is seen as more “extractive” than additive. That is to say, stakeholders or participants are used just as “consultants,” to share their lived experiences, but are not involved in analyzing the information and data collected, and once the study is finished, the community is rarely involved in making meaning of the findings and how to move forward with the next steps. Roche, author of “Impact Assessment for Development Agencies: Learning to Value Change,” indicates the need for full participation, as the “extended participation approach begins with the belief that poverty is primarily caused by injustice and inequality and that overcoming poverty is impossible without people’s full participation. This paradigm demands that outsiders relinquish control and act as catalysts for locally owned processes of empowerment and development (Roche, 1999, p.19).

Although participatory methods are now praised and recognized for their strengths and benefits, Robyn Eversole, in her article “Remaking Participation: Challenges for Community Development Practice,” provides an alternate, critical view of participation, and the need for development organizations to reframe and relearn how they view themselves. Much of the participatory methods and practices are still structured and owned by those who provide them, as compared with spaces that people create for themselves (2010, 36). Eversole asserts that “participatory development initiatives typically seat people’s participation firmly within ‘projects’ and ‘programs’ managed and funded by professionals in organizations. Whether these are projects to empower ‘disadvantaged communities’ narrowly, or ‘citizens’ broadly, experts and their institutions are still cast as the initiators, the developers, the agents of change” (2010, p.30).

If communities are actually able to empower themselves and transform to self-sustaining communities, then the idea of participation needs to be seen as multi-directional and practitioners need to see themselves as participants in the process as well. Eversole's critique coincides with the principles of co-creative processes: that development organizations need to understand the importance of local communities "situated knowledge" as these communities are able to understand their reality, context and situation in a way that an outside "expert" cannot. Members of the community will be able to recognize what will or won't work and what is best for them. Gaventa supports this idea when he explains in his literature review that "The majority of development on PM&E surveyed describes participatory approaches within a project-related context, reflecting externally led approaches" (1998, p. 14). The authors note that few examples describe community approaches to M&E, especially those which address continuous monitoring of the wider natural environment and tracking of local changes.

Rural realities

Statistics show that 70 percent of people in rural areas live in extreme economic poverty. In many developing countries, such as Bangladesh, and some countries in sub-Saharan Africa, that number increases to 90 percent (Khan, 2001). People living in rural poverty face myriad challenges from meeting their basic needs to accessing resources and opportunities for personal and professional development, health care, education, water, shelter, communication and transportation.

In Majid Rahnema's article, "Poverty," he explains that the relatively new global construct of poverty is meant to perpetuate power dynamics and dependence, and the "new fetish of a healthy global economy destined to save all the world's poor, not only helped the

pauperizing economic and political systems to reinforce and legitimize their positions, but also let their victims to perceive their own situations in the same terms” (Rahnema, p.163).

He described dependency as “the poor are assumed to be ‘underdeveloped and-momentarily at least-deprived of their capacity to define their own interests. It is up to those in a superior position of knowledge and power (governments, institutions, professionals, competent authorities) to assist them on their behalf. People’s participation is indeed welcomed whenever that could help the populations concerned to manifest their support for the professionally designed programs” (Rahnema, p. 163).

In Las Lagunas, Nicaragua, similar conditions of world poverty exist. Although rich in culture, community and family, the majority of the community live in very poor conditions with limited access to schools, job opportunities, health care and services. In Las Lagunas, eighty percent of the community has only a fifth grade level of education. Forty percent stay at home or are unemployed, 20 percent are in agriculture, and 10 percent are construction workers. The majority are making less than \$2 a day (Cordero Jarquín, 2015). However, it is important to focus on the strengths and resiliency of these communities. I learned through my experience at Las Lagunas and Hotel con Corazón that by only focusing on the needs of the community and the challenges that they face portrays individuals as passive, incapable recipients in need of outside aid or help in order to thrive. Many organizations approach development work focused on needs, which then becomes internalized by community members. Community members need instead to see themselves as collaborators and ‘key actors’ in the program process with their own strengths and abilities to work towards change individually and collectively.

Gaps in the literature

The literature that exists on the variety of methodologies is extensive. However, the focus is primarily on the theories and approaches rather than on practice and qualitative information, such as case studies, to demonstrate the impact or effect that using these methodologies has had. As Gaventa and Estrella explain in their literature review on the topic that:

“...greater emphasis appears to be on the documentation of the findings and results of the participatory evaluation, **rather than the process of carrying out PM&E (Participatory Monitoring and Evaluation) itself**. While the documentation of PM&E processes is rarely highlighted in the literature it seems evident that these processes – in other words, the very nature of how PM&E is actually conducted – very much influences and shapes the outcomes of what is learned and what information is obtained from PM&E practice” (1998, p. 46).

If reflection is believed to be a key aspect of these methodologies and approaches, with community members of the program, results and how to improve, then there needs to be more of an emphasis based on the learnings and reflections in research and literature, in order to strengthen and improve programs, practices and accountability.

We can see from the literature the importance of understanding that no one situation, project or community will be the same; that a project, approach and process needs to be flexible and adapted to the specific situation and group. Therefore, it would be beneficial, if not necessary, to learn from the lived experiences of those people from the community, not only those who are seen as the experts, facilitators and professionals.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

As noted in the introduction, I became interested in understanding more about the strengths and challenges of co-creating impact assessments in rural communities through my work at Hotel con Corazón. After my experience assisting with the participatory impact assessment, I wanted to learn more from people who had an extensive background in the field and would be able to share their insight with me. The Pelican Listserv proved to be a valuable resource for me along the way, while working on the impact assessment, as well as starting on this research journey. Pelican Listserv is a “platform for evidence-based learning and communication for social change, which focuses on one central question: How can we learn more from what we do while at the same time having the biggest possible impact on the social change processes in which we engage?”(<https://www.interaction.org/project/monitoring-evaluation/resources>). Hearing other practitioners’ questions and experiences was inspiring and opened my eyes to all of the different methodologies, approaches and philosophies that are being used in contexts all over the world.

For this research study, the framework I wanted to pursue was storytelling. I was inspired by the Sprockler methodology because sharing and listening to stories is a way that people make meaning of their experiences. I decided to carry out a qualitative research study to learn more from the lived experiences of professionals in the field. While the existing literature allowed me to understand the different concepts in theory, I wanted to learn more about how they were actually put into practice and what kind of learnings came about as a result of utilizing them. In order to capture more in-depth and detailed narratives and insight from my participants, I decided to utilize a semi-structured interview method. This method uses open-ended questions

to allow conversations to develop and allow knowledge to emerge that may not have been thought of in advance (Hesse-Biber, Leavy, 2011).

The literature review process also allowed me to prioritize my topics and structure my interview questionnaire. The research is exploratory and descriptive as it uses the stories and examples of practitioners to highlight the strengths and challenges of co-creative impact assessments in rural communities.

At the time of starting the research process, I had only met a few people with experience in program evaluation in rural communities so was unsure of how I could connect with people to interview. While perusing the SIT capstone collection, I came across a paper that had been written 12 years ago by a graduate student who had worked at a Nicaraguan hotel as well. I thought it would be interesting and worthwhile to learn about her experience living in Granada. It turned out that she had remained in Granada and has been very involved in the community – and married a Nicaraguan man. Connecting with her proved to be extremely beneficial. She became a strong source of support, inspiration and insight, as well as helping to direct me to people who work in community development in rural communities. I originally intended to carry out four or five in-depth interviews, but during my beginning interviews, participants suggested that I speak to other practitioners in the field who would have valuable information to share. In research, this process is known as “snowball sampling” where initial subjects in the study refer other possible participants who have relevant information and experience regarding the research topic (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). Through this process, I identified eight people to interview.

My research sample was one of convenience, as I spoke with people who were available, willing to participate in the research and whose general characteristics fit my study’s general objective – people who had experience working in rural communities using co-creative,

participatory approaches to conduct (impact) assessments (Hesse-Biber, Leavy, 2011, p. 55).

Before starting the process, I sent introduction letters to all of the potential participants informing them of my research topic and interest in interviewing them.

Data collection

Participants were informed of the purpose of my research, as well as the potential risks that could come from participating. Although I didn't consider the topic to be a sensitive one, there were a few occasions that participants did not want some specific details to be shared about their work with certain projects as they were confidential. These details were excluded from the report/ transcriptions. All participants gave permission to use their full names and background information in my final report. The interview questions were sent to participants once they agreed to be interviewed so that they could reflect and think about specific examples that they wanted to share prior to our interview. The definition that we agreed upon of "co-creative impact assessment" for the purpose of these interviews is the following: representative groups of community members should be involved in assessing or examining the changes of a project in every step of the process: creating a plan, data collection, analyzing results and sharing findings.

Interview participants

I interviewed eight people who had 10+ years working with rural communities in community development, M&E, and research with NGOs, governmental organizations, international development organizations and civic society organizations. They had a diverse range of experience in different sectors: Health, education, agriculture, sustainable tourism, public administration, systems innovations and conflict transformation. Six of the eight participants were Nicaraguan and two were Dutch. Although a research sample size of eight people could be considered small, I believe that their vast experience and range of knowledge

allowed a more holistic understanding of how co-creative, participatory approaches could be used in a wide variety of projects and fields.

Name	Nationality	Background	Current Organization/ Position
1. Yara Monjarrez	Nicaraguan	Rural Community Development/ Youth Empowerment	Opportunity International
2. Paul Engel	Dutch	Facilitation of multi-stakeholder innovation for development, impact evaluation and endogenous capacity development	Director at European Centre for Development Policy Management
3. Tomás Coulson Herrera	Nicaraguan	Education, Psychology, Rural Community Development	Community Connect,
4. Franklin Hernandez	Nicaraguan	Rural Tourism, Agricultural Engineering	Coordinator of Rural Tourism Programs: UCA Cooperative Union of Agriculture/ Farming
5. Dra. Reyna Cordero Jarquín	Nicaraguan	Rural Community Development, Community Health, Medicine and Education	Clínica Apoyo, Chief Doctor
6. María Belen Alvarez Mercado	Nicaraguan	Psychology, Education, Community Psychology and Rural Development	Education Coordinator, Hotel con Corazón
7. Henry Espinoza	Nicaraguan	Community Development Research, M&E, Situation Analysis and diagnostics, Reproductive health	Researcher for Health Systems and Public Administration in Nicaragua
8. Nele Bloomestein	Dutch	Design, Monitoring and Evaluation, Conflict Transformation, Education, Governance, Youth and Gender	Into Outcome Consultancy, Applying outcome measurement approaches for development evaluations

Interviews

The interviews were conducted March to April 2017. The questionnaire was used in all interviews, but the informal, conversational approach to the interviews allowed participants to delve deeper into certain areas, as well as enable me to ask-follow up questions. They were conducted by me in Spanish, English or both, depending on which language the participant felt most comfortable speaking. In order to fully engage with participants and not rely on note-taking during the interview process, interviews were recorded. Interviews lasted from 45 minutes to 2.5 hours, as some people provided more in-depth information and had more time to meet. Interviews were carried out wherever participants felt most comfortable and were able to meet in Nicaragua (Hotel con Corazón, offices, a health clinic in a rural community and a coffee shop) and Skype. All participants seemed very enthusiastic about the topic and provided narratives about their past experiences.

Data Analysis

Upon completion of interviews, I transcribed the interviews in order to study the data in further detail, compare, contrast and discover major themes among the responses. The transcription process was very worthwhile as I had to complete eight in-depth interviews in a short amount of time, re-listening and engaging with the stories in a more grounded manner, allowed for a deeper understanding of the data. Although the semi-structured interviews allowed for flexibility and a variety of responses, this made synthesizing the information challenging. I found many similarities and overlapping ideas and concepts throughout the responses. Creating “mind maps” and visual representations of the ideas allowed me to better understand how they were connected as well as organize my findings. I will present my findings using the most

prominent concepts discussed in interviews with experiences or stories from individual cases to illustrate the topic.

Limitations

I believe that the most significant limitation of my research is that I focused solely on interviewing professionals and practitioners in the field to learn about their experiences in the co-creative process of impact evaluations. In order to obtain a more holistic view of the research question, it is necessary to hear from people with diverse backgrounds, experiences and insight in order to find a sustainable solution that is designed to bring about the best outcome for everyone. To truly understand the individual and collective benefits of a co-creative process, it would've been beneficial to discuss insight and feedback and hear the perspectives from different groups of stakeholders, in particular those who live in the rural communities. Since the majority of the interviewees are Nicaraguan, many of their responses are context-specific, and because of the particular political climate and culture, some approaches and methodologies may not be applicable in other settings. Time constraint was another limitation, as I connected with participants only two weeks before leaving Nicaragua so I wasn't able to meet with participants more than once and collect follow-up information, which could have clarified questions and doubts regarding certain themes in the interviews.

FINDINGS

Emerging themes

The stories shared by interview participants provide insight into the wide range of co-creative impact assessments, as well as into challenges for the field. In my survey, responses reflect that there exists a “great diversity in concepts, methods, and applications adopted” (Gaventa, 1998, p. 6). As noted previously, the interviewees were drawn from different sectors of the development field including agriculture, government, health, education, social enterprise and integrated community development. All of the themes presented were highlighted by the majority of the respondents, and as such, I will illustrate the underlining concepts through the stories and examples they shared. It’s interesting to note that many of the themes overlap and are interconnected.

The themes are as follows:

- The Importance of Using Strengths-Based Approaches
- The Principle of Learning and Growth
- The Potential for Capacity Building
- Trust: Building Unity in the Community
- Time and Commitment
- The Inclusion of Marginalized Groups
- The “Pressure to Prove”
- Participative Methodologies and Approaches
- Breaking the Cycle of “Asistencialismo”

The importance of using strengths-based approaches

Yara Monjarrez, community development organizer from Opportunity International, works in six different rural areas of Nicaragua. She explained that she creates partnerships with communities to initiate projects where members of the community are treated as key actors and equal partners in their development plans and progress. As Opportunity International already has a link to communities through their agriculture initiatives (micro-financing loans and training for

yucca farmers), she then partners with communities where they already have a connection to work towards sustainable growth and transformation.

She explained, “We make business plans with the community based on their goals and dreams, then develop a plan *TOGETHER* based on what they want to achieve. How do we do this? First, with the community leaders and participants, we make a *mapa de activos*: what abilities, strengths, knowledge, resources and experiences already exist within the community.”

In the group they don’t talk about what the community needs, but rather they change the language to encourage positivity, teamwork, talk about goals and prioritize together. Community members engage in a dialogue about what is the most important to them. This process leads to long-term relationships and ownership of the project by the people involved. In one of her last projects, a community wanted to repair the doors on their school and church. Through this activity, the group came up with different ideas to raise money: organizing a raffle, selling food, collecting money and soliciting people within the community that would be able to do the woodwork, build and fix the doors.

Monjarrez stated that together with the group, “We evaluate the program halfway through to see how much progress is being made, what we could do to strengthen the efforts. The same project planners and community leaders look at their budget, the timeframe, the impact and discuss their progress before moving forward. Although it is important to continue focusing on the strengths, it is also necessary to investigate the weaknesses, possible negative impact and challenges being faced, and then look at how the strengths and resources that already exist can be used to overcome these obstacles.” Through this evaluation process, they counseled and advised themselves, realizing what else needed to be done before continuing on, building on their capacity to self-evaluate, increase community ownership and create an agenda for the next phase.

In this particular project, they realized that they needed the involvement of more community members to ensure the success of the project through fundraising, so decided to have an assembly to inform more people about their hopes to improve the community. Within two weeks, the group had fundraised the required money, organized themselves to divide the workload and by the end of the month, had completed the project. All of the doors were repaired, and they even had money remaining to put towards their next project. It is not surprising that after completing one project and evaluating it, participants are more enthusiastic and willing to work together to collaborate towards their next goal. “We start within the community and see what they can do without external forces in order to complete the project. They realize that they can do 80% of the work without any outside help and that is really uplifting and motivating,” she said. (Y. Monjarrez, personal communication, April 20, 2017).

Monjarrez explained to me that in the beginning of the process, many rural communities still have the attitude that they won’t be able to achieve their goals and objectives without the aid and assistance of outside organizations and help but with the focus on strengths and goals throughout every step of the process, from the initial goal-setting meetings, to the design of the business plan, budget, project implementation, to the monitoring and evaluation, individuals and communities have changed the way they see themselves, how they interact with each other and achieve their individual and collective aspirations.

This strengths-based approach and framework was emphasized by all the practitioners I interviewed. They stressed the importance of believing in the innate capabilities, wisdom, resources and experiences, individual and collective, of the communities. This belief is much more empowering, positive and beneficial than that of the traditional view in development work that looks to help address the problems within a community, focusing on needs and deficiencies,

rather than strengths, which communities begin to internalize and see themselves as people with needs that can only be met by external forces and institutions. According to Willets, et al., “The logical consequence of focusing on assets, capacities, and capabilities is to encourage a proactive role for the citizen, replacing the passive, dependent role of client in the welfare service delivery model of community development practice” (2014, p. 355). Expanding on this idea, implementing this framework can empower and encourage people, organizations and communities to “take personal and social responsibility and respond appropriately to their own health and livelihood needs in their own culture” (Willets, et al., 2014, p. 355).

The Principle of Learning and Growth

The principle of learning was another concept that was highlighted throughout my research and interviews. Creating an environment conducive to learning and open communication is a key aspect of the process. **Paul Engel**, rural development specialist, explained that “only those who learn are able to improve their performance and to adapt to changing settings.”

Engel has worked in many countries all over the world to improve agriculture initiatives in rural communities. He developed RAAKS: Rapid Appraisal of Agricultural Knowledge Systems, which is an “action-oriented methodology that helps stakeholders learn together, enhancing communication and information exchange in support of innovation.” RAAKS seeks to give ownership of change processes to local stakeholders, helping them to gain a better understanding of their performance of innovators and includes windows and tools for facilitating change processes.

Engel explained that through the use of a participatory, multi-stakeholder approach to assess the impact of a program is all about allowing people to share their knowledge and together

assessing whether progress is being made or not towards impact indicators. Looking at an impact assessment as a conversation with many people instead of a rigid, quantitative measurement will provide a lot more information and allow for greater learning. “Most of the time the framework and the indicators don’t provide a really good sense of where the change or impact actually is, especially if the people who designed the program aren’t from the community and don’t know what they are doing, which is often the case.” Therefore, by using a co-creative approach that facilitates an environment for people to share insights, to inquire and reflect, and come up with new creative approaches and ideas will come about and then (the community, facilitator, organization) can benefit from what people have learned during the project and apply this to new areas. (Engel, personal Communication, May 16, 2017). Respondents shared that through the experience of participating, sharing, asking questions, hearing different perspectives, reflecting, co-creating project plans and evaluations, learning will take place and this is where meaningful change can come about.

In Gaventa and Estrella’s aforementioned extensive literature review on participatory evaluation, they also explain that it can serve as a process of individual and collective learning, describing it as an educational experience for those various parties involved in a development program. “People become more aware and conscious of their strengths and weaknesses, their wider social realities, and their visions and perspectives of development outcomes. It is the learning process that creates conditions conducive to change and action” (Estrella & Gaventa, 1998, p.22).

Tomás Coulson Herrera, a psychologist and rural community development specialist, provided another thoughtful example of the concept of learning. When working with the organization FODECA, a cooperative for community initiatives, one of the primary projects

being carried out was a youth leadership program in six different rural areas. After a year of existence, the head of the program wanted to carry out an impact assessment. Because this organization was funded by a partner organization in Italy, they were being asked for statistics and more quantitative information. Herrera, however, wanted to try a different approach and knew that the youth would enjoy and benefit from leaving their communities and seeing a new place. He also believed that it would be transformative and beneficial to get the youth out of their comfort zone. With the youth groups, he explained that they were going to carry out activities to share what they had learned, what changes they had experienced since participating in the program, and whether project achievements had been made. Each group of participants went to another town to interview each other, record results, and participate in a group discussion about themselves, leadership and their communities.

Students learned that they felt much more confident, able and capable and had the capacity to make changes in their lives and communities. Discussing and sharing their stories was an empowering process as it provided the chance to learn and inspire one another. This process turned out to exceed Herrera's expectations as some of the participants wanted to find out ways that they could help each other. This learning activity lead to the young students coming up with sustainable solutions and business ideas to share with each other. Each community group designed their own project, found a mentor to help train them and implemented their ideas. One of the examples that Herrera shared was the creation of a little school supply store in front of their local school, using recyclable materials from the schools (notebooks, paper, pencil holders, etc.). They provided discounts to the students and then donated the money to other causes (a social enterprise!), as well as developed the skills and abilities to lead the project on their own without the help from external sources or experts. The

impact of this project allowed them to build on their own ideas, confidence and contribute to their community (T. Coulson Herrera, personal communication, April 22, 2017).

The Potential for Capacity Building

Learning and capacity building are two concepts that can go hand-in-hand. “One of the main objectives of PM&E is to enhance the sustainability, replicability, and effectiveness of development efforts through the strengthening of people’s organizational capacities. It aims to enable people to keep track of their progress, by identifying and solving problems themselves and by building on and expanding areas of activity is recognized (CONCERN 1996).”

Franklin Hernandez has been working for 10 years as a community development specialist with UCA Agua y Tierra, a cooperative of rural communities that offer tourist activities and trips to share the beautiful environment and daily life with outsiders. Visitors can experience and learn more about agriculture, life and culture in rural areas of Nicaragua, which then provides locals with a sustainable source of income, thus improving the communities’ well-being and ability to meet their needs and prosper. The program, although first organized through international cooperation, is now completely managed and supported by the communities themselves, without any external assistance. In fact, the program has completely evolved since its inception. While the program began by solely focusing on providing lodging and meals in rural homes, people realized that there were many other ways that they could contribute to their livelihoods and developed other offerings, including cooking classes, tours of natural attractions in their communities, and selling art and handicrafts.

Hernandez explained that training and capacity-building was a very important part of this progress and transformation. While they didn’t have a strict evaluation or assessment protocol to measure the results or impact of the program, Hernandez would meet with the group on a monthly basis to see if program objectives and goals were being met. Through discussions,

workshops and group interviews, people directly involved in the program as well as other community members would come together to explore the results being observed in the environment, as well as changes in behavior, attitude, knowledge of the people and whether these changes were positive or not. Hernandez shared that people would take turns leading these meetings, practicing skills in planning, organizing, facilitating and conducting evaluations. Some of the trainings they received were formal, while some came about from practicing. “Many of the activities and workshops worked towards personal development. Many of the people I worked with were shy and unsure of themselves when speaking up, and over time they became more comfortable expressing themselves, sharing ideas, and trying new ways of doing things.” These processes have helped strengthen informal leadership skills, cooperation and collaboration within the community. The experiences that Hernandez shared reinforced much of the existing literature that demonstrates how co-creative evaluations processes have transformative potential:

“The process of learning in participatory monitoring and evaluation (PM&E) is further perceived as a means for local capacity building. Participants in PM&E gain skills which strengthen local capacities for planning, problem solving and decision making. Participants obtain greater understanding of the various factors (internal and external) that affect the conditions and dynamics of their project, the basis for their successes and failures, and the potential solutions or alternative actions”(Gaventa & Estrella, 1998, p. 28).

Through the participatory evaluations and workshops, other community members decided to join the cooperative and become involved. With group brainstorming sessions and planning, implementing, ongoing trial and error and critically reflecting on projects, positive changes in the community were made through the actions of participants and people felt more empowered. When I asked Hernandez about the benefits of this project and process, he explained that in the beginning of the program, only a few people believed that this project would be successful and they weren't convinced that they were capable of running their own businesses or that tourists

would be interested in learning more about their way of life. They didn't see the value in it. The process of preparing, learning more about their own environment and how to teach people about it, creating a business plan and working together proved to be extremely beneficial. "Using their strengths, all families involved have managed to improve their socio-economic and personal situation. The income that they received as a result of tourism and their hard work allowed them to cover other necessities that they had as a family. Also this permitted the community to create new employment positions and opportunities within their community. The community also came together to use some of the money for collective purposes, putting it towards the construction of new infrastructure, such as a recreation center that can serve as a place for reunions and social activities, a space for everyone to use and that benefits the entire community. In fact, they also use this space to rent and to raise money for other things that they need." (Hernandez, personal communication, April 22, 2016). This is an accurate example of how these processes allowed members of the community to come together to overcome obstacles, make their own decisions and works towards their aspirations.

Trust: Building Unity in the Community

Doctora Reyna Cordero of Rural Community Development, Community Health, shared with me that during her monthly meetings to discuss health issues within the community, people started off very hesitant to participate as there was a lot of division in the community. However, when they started to meet more often to talk and evaluate the progress of the program, they began organize themselves to come up with new solutions and plans for what to do on days that the local clinic was not open. Together they decided it would be important for them to be trained on how to make homemade remedies, administer shots, bandage wounds, etc. They improved communication amongst themselves established a stronger sense of unity throughout the process,

which improved relationships, and in turn, some of the health issues and concerns that the community was facing.

The individuals I interviewed from Nicaragua explained that one characteristic of rural communities in their country is there exists a large sense of distrust and lack of community organization because of the division between political parties, corruption, instability and the civil war that ended roughly 30 years ago. Participants in my interviews talked about the difficulties of building trust with the facilitators of the evaluation process and trust amongst the participants in order for people to be able to connect and work together. Everyone explained that through many of these group processes, they always started with team and trust building exercises and appropriate ice-breakers to create a comfortable atmosphere to allow people to get to know each other better, form relationships and establish a common ground. They emphasized the importance of using a variety of fun, creative methods as well to open up a space to get people “to think outside of the box,” hear a variety of perspectives and develop a sense of identity among the group members. When people feel at ease and trust one another, group efforts will be much more effective and enjoyable.

As we can see from the literature and the examples shared thus far, the use of participatory, co-creative methodologies for impact assessments require people to talk and listen, to recognize the strengths in each other and their community, and build upon those to achieve their goals. All of the practitioners that I interviewed explained that the concept of “trust” is one of the biggest strengths *and* challenges of these processes. As in any place, in rural communities you will find that some are more united and close-knit than others; this could be a result of the culture, historical, political and social context, geographical distance between housing, etc.

The role of a facilitator was another area that was brought up in many of the interviews. Interview participants shared with me that co-creative evaluations would not be possible if the facilitator doesn't hold certain qualities such as, first, being seen not as an expert, but as a participant and a learner as well. He or she needs to be open-minded and flexible, committed to the efforts and objective of the group, believe in the capabilities of the group, be motivating and a good listener, patient, have strong interpersonal skills, and a deep understanding of the culture and context of the people they are working with.

Local accompaniment by leaders

Another point made was that in order to build trust, it is essential to have “local accompaniment” and work with the community through informal and formal community leaders. Nicaragua, for example, is a very hierarchical society and rates very high on the Power Distance Index. There are members of the community that are more highly-respected and trusted. **María Belen Alvarez Mercado**, the education coordinator of Hotel con Corazón, worked with an organization to improve infrastructure and education initiatives in rural areas in Northern Nicaragua. Working with a community, it is always critical to hear the voices of different stakeholders and members, but she explained in order to do this, the first step in creating a partnership is always determining and speaking to its already established leaders. However, she was also noted that this process can also perpetuate an already-existing power structure if there is political or religious division in the community. She advised speaking to a variety of leaders to enable a wider participation.

“Speaking with leaders at the beginning of any process will facilitate that at an internal level you have allies and local collaborators. Local leaders can help bring together community members, invite people to participate, visit homes to speak with people, which will guarantee more trust. If people from rural communities see an outsider arrive, they won't know why you're there and won't feel comfortable. But if you have

accompaniment from local leaders or members of the community, people will feel more trust to express themselves and what they are feeling. In terms of an evaluation, you can assure that more likely the data or information you receive will be more accurate and honest- and people will feel and know that they are a part of the process, instead of as an object of the process.” (María Belen Alvarez, personal communication, April 20, 2017).

Time and commitment

Although everyone that I interviewed stressed the time factor as a disadvantage of participatory approaches in impact assessments, they explained that the benefits most definitely outweigh it. **Henry Espinoza**, a researching and monitoring specialist, compared his experience conducting an external evaluation of a governmental health initiative to a participatory evaluation for an NGO working towards increasing awareness and education of reproductive health. While the external approach took only three weeks (participation with the community was more “consultative”), the co-creative evaluation involving people of all different ages in the development of indicators, data collection and analysis and sharing the findings lasted more than six months. Although time-consuming and at times exhausting, this process allowed the information and learning to contribute and stay within the community, rather than extract from it.

The literature on participatory evaluation and impact assessments also explains that one of the most significant challenges is the amount of time it takes, which is why so many organizations rely on external evaluators who have previous experience, knowledge and expertise to carry out the evaluations and processes so that they can conduct the assessment more quickly and efficiently. In the aforementioned topic of trust, the people I interviewed stressed that it takes time to build trust and relationships in communities. It takes time to hold regular discussions and dialogue to strive towards hearing the perspectives of different stakeholders. It takes more time to train people and find the most appropriate methodology and approach for the

situation and the group. It takes more time to come up with creative activities and processes. It takes more time to build the commitment and willingness of the group.

In the Community Tool Box description, they purport that even the drawbacks can be seen in a positive way: “...some of these disadvantages can be seen as advantages! The training people receive blends in with their development of new skills that can be transferred to other areas of life, for instance; coming up with creative ways to express ideas benefits everyone; once funders and policy makers are persuaded of the benefits of the participatory process and evaluation, they may encourage others to employ it as well” (<http://ctb.ku.edu/en/table-of-contents/evaluate/evaluation/participatory-evaluation/main>).

Inclusion of marginalized groups: a challenge and benefit

Nele Bloomestein, a Dutch M&E consultant who has worked in rural contexts all over the world, explained that one of the greatest strengths of using participatory methodology in evaluations is its capacity to include the voices and perspectives of groups that are normally not accounted for in many different settings as a result of political and social structures. Although it can present a challenge to initiate their involvement and participation because it isn't traditionally accepted or allowed, when spaces are created that allow people to share their experiences, opinions, concerns and goals it can begin to shift paradigms and lead to the empowerment of marginalized groups. She went on to discuss how the participatory approaches she uses are “tailor-made” to the context, and take into consideration the power dynamics of any given situation and place. At times, this meant separating focus groups into male and female to ensure that women would be comfortable expressing themselves, as they may not be able to do so in a room full of men. Similar to what was discussed in the section about capacity-building,

through participation in these different processes, marginalized groups – in this case, the women could strengthen and develop skills that took their needs into consideration.

Bloomestein also talked about the importance of using methodologies that are appropriate for children; in her work with War Child Holland, an organization that strives to improve the psychosocial support, education and protection of children and adolescents who have experienced the trauma of war and armed conflict (<https://www.warchildholland.org/our-work>), all of the ongoing evaluations and feedback sessions of their programs are carried out by the children participating, with the guidance of facilitators, using games, focus groups, drawings and pictures, score-cards, reflection and dialogue. Children help to create indicators of success themselves of what it meant to “be empowered” and healthy within their community, thus they were able to give input into what they were observing within themselves, their peers and community. War Child carried out an evaluation of the actual participatory process and many facilitators, as well as participants themselves, shared that they “felt empowered being asked for their opinion and felt more confident expressing their ideas and recommendations” (Nele Bloomestein, personal communication, May 16, 2017). The programs adapt to the feedback given in order to increase effectiveness and works towards their mission of fostering psychosocial growth of the children they serve. Bloomestein’s philosophies and approaches coincide with what is in the literature review about participatory approaches that “stress the importance of involving relatively marginalized groups, such as the very poor, women, and children, people with disabilities, among others. According to these perspectives, participatory evaluation is about involving the least powerful, visible and assertive actors in evaluating development efforts.” (Gaventa & Estrella, 1998, p. 22).

The “pressure to prove”

Interview participants all expressed that the “pressure to prove” to funders and donors the impact of the different programs is also a challenge in using participatory approaches. Many people still believe in “cause and effect,” not taking into consideration the complexity and interrelated factors that may play a part in any community or development effort. In order to do this, one would need rigorous baseline studies and control groups, in-depth statistical analysis and test, yet the people I spoke with explained that this isn’t realistic or feasible in many situations. **Thomas Herrera** explained that in one of the initiatives that he worked on, families in a rural community were given chickens so that they could start producing their own eggs and sell them. The initiative did not last long because after a few months they realized that 1) people had not been trained to raise chickens, their diet consisted of mainly rice and beans so they ended up selling the chickens or killing them for meat, and 2) farmers in the area who had been making a living raising chickens were now not able to earn money and were forced to look for new ways to support themselves (T. Coulson Herrera, personal communication, April 22, 2017). His example showed the importance of doing continuous impact assessments as the community came together to discuss their experiences of the project and together, were able to create better, more sustainable solutions with the community.

Often, impact assessments aim to identify the long-term effects of a program or intervention, however, many aren’t able to account for all of the changes that may have occurred in dynamic environments. According to Adams, et al., in “Innovations in Impact Measurement,” “...to state that an intervention has impact, usually requires a high degree of certainty attribution, based on the existence of a relevant control group against which to judge a counterfactual (i.e. what would have happened anyway without the intervention)” (p.2015, p.6). This article goes on to explain that the term “social performance measurement” may be a better term for this process.

Parallel to this idea, the practitioners that I spoke with spoke of the need for a shift in perspective from viewing extensive impact studies as a “single event” and instead focus on the need to carry out more ongoing, continuous assessments and evaluations; of course, including the perspectives from a diverse group of stakeholders, in order to continually adapt and learn from their efforts, identify possible negative impacts, and then make changes based on the feedback that emerges.

Participative methodologies and approaches

Both personal interviews and the literature review demonstrate the need for approaches to impact assessments to be structured and adapted to the group, situation, content and context. Many of the people that I spoke with explained that in rural communities, levels of education and literacy may be lower, therefore, methods and approaches need to permit everyone the option of participating, even if they can’t read or write. As collaboration, team work, communication and organization are all means and goals of creating positive change in a community, efforts need to use tools and methodologies that allow people to practice these skills, facilitate action and collective solutions through participative processes.

- Mind Maps
- Focus Groups
- FODA (SWOT analysis)
- Learning exchanges with different communities
- Semi-structured interviews
- Mapping of the community
- Role-plays
- Storytelling
- Workshops
- Interviews
- Brainstorm activities
- Dialogue

Breaking the cycle of “Asistencialismo”

Many of the individuals I interviewed discussed the concept of “asistencialismo,” which is a term in Spanish that means dependence on charity or welfare based-initiatives, and has been described as the opposite of empowerment. **Thomas Herrera and Yara Monjarrez** both explained the difference between the two concepts using the phrase, “Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day, teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime.” In Nicaragua, the respondents explained that there are many NGOs and governmental organizations that, despite their good intentions to help serve the people and alleviate any suffering, many of their actions perpetuate this dependence on outside help and the belief that communities are not capable of achieving their goals and helping themselves. Through the use of participatory evaluations and impact assessments, community members can become empowered and work towards ending this cycle of “asistencialismo” when both people from the community and institutions realize that they must work together and listen to each other in order to work towards change.

When discussing this topic, one of the participants recommended a TEDTalk video titled “Want to Help Someone? Shut Up and Listen!” (2012), given by Ernesto Sirotti, about the importance of truly listening to people first in any “development or aid effort” as people have their own knowledge, passions, wisdom, creativity, energy and imagination. In Eversole’s article, “Remaking Participation,” she underlines the necessity of validating, listening to and understanding and embracing this “local” knowledge as well:

“Outsiders seldom have this deeply placed knowledge, and may too easily suggest ‘solutions’ that are inappropriate, unsustainable, or from a local perspective, clearly ignorant. The knowledge that ‘local people’ or ‘community members’ acquire from their lived experiences involves an ability to see and understand the nature of connections and interrelationships more clearly than professionals can do working from within the conceptual frameworks of their particular silos of expertise”(2010, p. 33).

During participatory evaluations and impact assessments, through dialogues and discussions, different ideas and solutions can emerge. Monjarrez explained that in a monthly gathering in one of the communities, the participants were frustrated because their water tank hadn't been functioning correctly and one of the obstacles was the poor conditions of the roads that lead to the tank. Monjarrez asked them questions about what actions needed to be taken in order to solve this problem (rather than presenting ideas) and the people realized that it was their right to have access to clean, safe water and that the government should be providing this for them. They decided to speak with the leader of the municipality to demand that it be fixed, and when he ignored them, they found out where he was going to be in order to confront him and make sure that they received the resources they needed. A local television station found out, interviewed the community and covered the story. As a result of their action, coming together, self-advocacy and determination, the municipality repaired their roads and the water tank was fixed within a week. Monjarrez shared that other communities she worked with expressed their motivation to organize themselves and take action after hearing about this communities efforts.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Overall, the findings of my research confirm and support the importance of co-creation in impact assessments and participatory evaluations in rural communities. Impact assessments are an essential part of any program or project in order to evaluate effectiveness, for accountability, learning and growth. The stories, perspectives and experiences shared by practitioners in the field, backed by existing literature demonstrate that, when truly participatory and co-created with the community, they can bring people together, improve communication and trust, build individual and group confidence, strengthen and develop skills.

The findings show these processes can be improved and enhanced when the assessments are carried out continuously, rather than infrequently over long periods of time. The research

also suggests that using these approaches is less of a challenge when the initiative or project itself has been co-created and community-led, rather than designed and implemented by an external organization. The examples demonstrate the positive effects of developing projects (solutions) *with* the community with a strong focus on their aspirations, goals, strengths, and opportunities. When people have ownership and have taken part in the entire process, the findings show that it is easier to reflect, recommend solutions, take action and make sustainable changes. Creating better partnerships and learning how to participate in the community processes is another proposal, which can be done through understanding the political, social and cultural context, listening, building relationships, and valuing local knowledge. Although the time constraints and navigating power dynamics prove to be a challenge when utilizing participatory, co-creative methodologies, the benefits are definitely worthwhile.

As suggested in the literature review, there needs to be more discussion, research, and documentation into the learnings and real-life examples of participatory approaches. Using my experience with Hotel con Corazón, I learned that the evaluation process must also be monitored and evaluated, in order to make sure that the methodology is culturally and contextually appropriate, participants are able to share and obtain the information they need, that learning is taking place, and contributing to the community. It is only through this process that we can change and improve the approaches and foster a space where connection and growth can take place.

“Truly participatory development does not just teach, engage and empower communities, it teaches, engages and empowers the organizations that work with communities to see and do things differently.”

~ Robyn Eversole, *Remaking Participation*

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Annex 1: Interview Questions

The central guiding questions of my study were as follows:

1. Can you tell me about your background and experience? How did you get involved in this field? Your professional experience?
2. What has been your experience working in rural communities?
3. Can you describe your experience co-creating impact evaluations?
4. What have been the challenges of co-creation in rural communities?
5. What have been the strengths?
6. What have been the responses of the community? Have you observed/ heard or been told of any longer term impacts of this co-creation or participation?
7. What does “empowerment” mean to you?
8. When co-creating an impact evaluation in a country/ context different from your own, what do you think are the cultural and environmental factors that need to be taken into consideration?
9. What advice or recommendations would you give to someone who is planning on conducting or co-creating an impact study in a rural zone?
10. How have these experiences impacted you personally and professionally?
11. Is there anything that you would like to share that I did not ask?

H HOTEL CON CORAZON IMPACT STUDY 2009-2016



EIGHT YEARS IN LAS LAGUNAS

Already eight years working in the community of Las Lagunas in Granada, Nicaragua, made us decide to take a closer look at whether our efforts are making a difference. We conducted an impact study to gain a better understanding of how our students and other stakeholders are experiencing our programs and how this may be changing their lives and the community at large. And we can proudly report that our work clearly has a positive impact, and together with all the people involved with Corazón, we are heading in the right direction, changing lives and the community.

The study consisted of three parts: a quantitative study to determine what former and current student participants are doing now and whether they have continued their studies. And two qualitative approaches to learn from participants' experiences through storytelling and focus group discussions.

The study was designed and facilitated by Johanna Ulseth, a Master's degree student from SIT (School for International Training) in the United States).

Hanna: "An impact study helps to understand change and to evaluate effectiveness. It was a privilege for me to be part of this process and to hear all the different perspectives. I am grateful for the experience of connecting with so many people and seeing first-hand what a team effort this project is and what a difference it has made. I'm especially thankful to all those who shared their stories and hopes for the future."



FACTS & MISSION CON CORAZON

According to the 2015 United Nations Human Development Index Report, the primary school drop out rate in Nicaragua is 51.6%. In primary school, 3 out of 10 students are already one year behind their age group; and out of 100 that start the first grade, 40 don't make it through the sixth grade. These statistics are attributed to a lack of education funding, inadequate facilities and resources, and insufficient teacher training. Furthermore, many students live in poverty and must leave school to find work to support their family.

The mission of Hotel con Corazón is to help people in developing countries build a brighter future by investing in education and work.

- We support children to finish their education all the way from primary school up to higher education- so that they increase their employment prospects.
- We stimulate local economic development by running a profitable business- a healthy enterprise that creates jobs and provides income and professional development for its employees.

THE CORAZON APPROACH

Foundation Hotel con Corazón strongly believes in the power of education in maximizing the potential of individuals. Therefore, 100% of our profits are invested in local education programs to empower students, their families and the community to build a brighter future.

We work towards our vision through a variety of strategies:

- Tutoring and extracurricular activities.
- Home visits and parent workshops.
- Scholarships for secondary and university students.
- Collaboration with other NGOs.

Through these ingredients we work together to increase the quality of life in the community and ultimately to breaking the cycle of poverty.

PRINCIPLES THAT GUIDE ALL OUR DECISIONS



- **Fun and Fresh:**
Contemporary, no-nonsense and having fun together.
- **A place to be you:**
Simple luxury and genuine service to offer a home away from home.
- **"Couleur locale":**
International spirit in our hearts and local blood in our veins.
- **Good business:**
We want to make a healthy profit for a good cause.

ENJOY TODAY, CARE FOR TOMORROW



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NUMBERS

Fourteen secondary and 29 university students received scholarships. We are supporting 166 students since then through our collaboration with other NGOs.

- Since 2012, of the 29 scholarship recipients, seven have graduated and are working.
- In our scholarship program, three students decided to stop and are no longer studying. Four students no longer receive scholarships as they are working and are now able to pay their tuition themselves.
- 71% of all students that participated in the tutoring programs are still studying (65% of the girls, 76% of the boys), 19% have stopped and 10% we were unable to find any information.

	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
									Projected
Elementary school (Las Lagunas)	48	86	96	105	145	168	163	159	160
Secondary school (Las Lagunas)			7	10	37	32	32	32	36
Secondary school scholarships					4	8	9	11	14
University scholarships		1	2	4	12	19	15	19	15
Via other NGOs	11	11	21	11	22	21	12	26	28
Employees' education (and children)					12	12	11	15	15
TOTAL	59	98	126	142	232	259	246	261	266

STORIES & FOCUS GROUPS

"Can you share a story about something that has changed in your life since participating in tutoring classes?"

Starting in November 2016, we collected stories using an innovative research tool called Sprockler. More than 100 students, parents, tutors and other stakeholders were asked to share a story about an experience related to Hotel con Corazón. Interviews were carried out at both schools (San Pablo and Bertha Gutierrez), with scholarship recipients, graduates and drop-outs, both in the community and at the hotel. Afterwards each storyteller answered clarifying questions that allow larger patterns to emerge once all stories are collected.

We also conducted focus group discussion to understand our impact in the community. We talked about strengths and challenges of the community, the role and impact of the hotel, and people's hopes for the future. Seven people participated, including two community leaders, the clinic doctor, two mothers of tutoria participants, a father of two scholarship recipients, and one of the oldest members of the community. In this report we share the main insights of our research. If you want to read or listen to the stories of the students or other storytellers, visit the interactive report at www.reports.sprockler.com/hotelconcorazon

WHAT DID WE LEARN?

1: Increased motivation:

All groups of participants (parents, tutors, students and scholarship recipients) shared that they feel more motivated in their work, studies, and personal lives as a result of participating in the Corazón program. Some parents expressed their desire to return to school after seeing the advancement in their children in order to help them with their homework and make progress themselves.

"A special moment for me was when the secondary students took a special trip to visit the INTECNA technical college. That day I realized that I wanted to study auto-mechanics....I'm now studying there! The tutors helped me to prepare for the entrance exam and taught me how to be more focused on my studies and that learning is an important part of life..." - Victor, student Las Lagunas and now scholarship student Automotive Transportation (19)



2: Increased parent involvement:

More parents are involved in their children's education and participate in reunions and workshops. Community members noticed that there are many more parents that attend the monthly 'school of the parents' at Hotel con Corazón than other school events.

"I want to be involved and make sure that

my son has a better life and education than I did. I raised my son by myself and Hotel con Corazón has supported me to do that. Now I attend "parent school" at my son's high school and am not afraid to participate and speak up." - Leyla, mother of Deyvi, secondary scholarship recipient

3: Increase in knowledge:

Many younger children expressed a change in abilities and an increase in knowledge. They explained that before coming to tutoring classes in the afternoon they were not able to read, write, add and subtract and now they are able to.

"I've learned a lot. I feel happy in English and in computer class. I have also learned many values, to respect and value. Coming here makes school easier. Also when they take us to new places outside our community and learn about our culture, it makes us feel proud of being Nicaraguan." - Eddy, student (13)

4: Increased pride and confidence:

A change in abilities has also led to an increase in pride and confidence. Students said that they now know that they can succeed and learn even when "things are difficult." This pride is also evident in the tutors' stories, who shared their excitement when some of their most



'challenging' students learned how to read and write. Many tutors also expressed a personal change, becoming more confident in their teaching abilities and searching for new, creative teaching methods and strategies.

"Before tutoring classes, my son didn't know how to read. Thanks to the tutors, he has learned to read and participate in the dynamics and games, in the abilities that he didn't believe he had and to develop as a person and to love himself." - Violeta, mother

5: Increase in secondary school enrollment:

The number of secondary students has



increased dramatically. Students used to have to travel into the city to attend secondary school. Due to increased enrollment, San Pablo school has started offering Saturday classes for students.

"There are many more students staying in school. Before we didn't have a secondary school, and now there are too many students in one classroom! Just a few years ago there were only 10 sixth graders and now there are 40!" - Rebeca, mother

6: Applied learning success:

Many scholarship recipients shared positive stories about being able to apply what they learn in school to an actual work environment, such as the hotel. Some of the scholarship recipients also talked about sharing their knowledge and giving back to the community through providing homework help and classes to reinforce what they are learning in school to secondary scholarship students in Las Lagunas on Saturdays.

"One of the crucial moments that I have experienced with Foundation Hotel con Corazón is that it has given me the opportunity to share a little of what I have learned throughout my life as a student



with the young scholarship recipients for the same foundation that supported me." – Reneo, university scholarship student

care of their community and there is less trash in our community now." – Don Jose, community leader

7: Noticeable town improvements:

Many people also shared that Hotel con Corazón together with other NGO's has played a role in the improved infrastructure and maintenance of the schools. Los Amigos de Las Lagunas, a group of several NGOs (Opportunity International, Casa de La Mujer, Cocinica, Clinca Apoyo and Hotel con Corazón) painted the school buildings and preschool classrooms, planted flowers, and donated new desks. Through these partnerships, we strengthen our own work and support each other on various projects to reach the wider community. The community now has its own clinic and a factory that provides jobs producing safer, more environmentally friendly stoves.

8: Awareness of the importance of education:

Many people shared that they now have a stronger appreciation for the education that they are receiving, and believe that this enables them

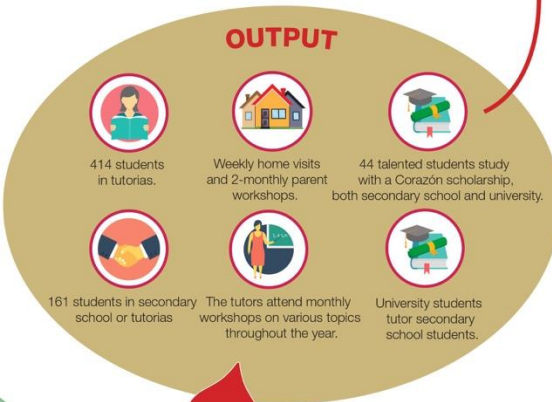
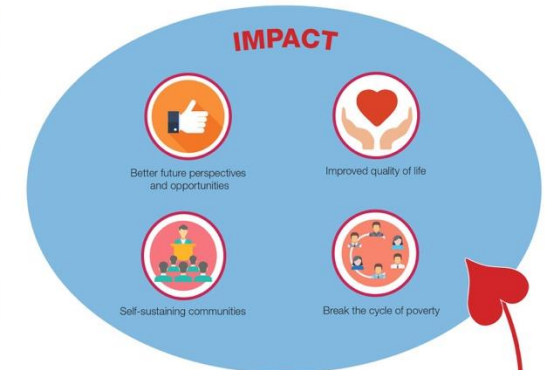
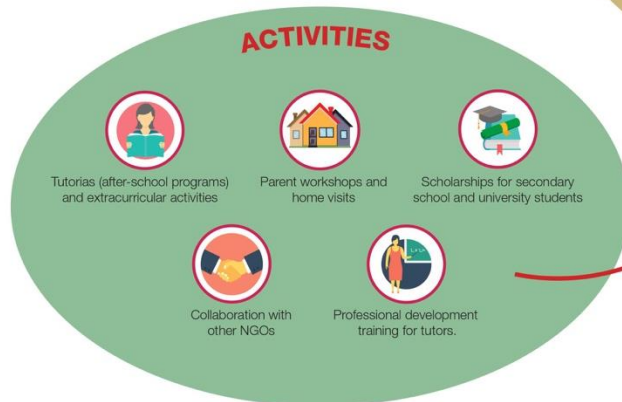


to develop personally and professionally and will contribute to their future success.



"Our community has improved and looks much better. People are taking better

"The tutoring program serves to strengthen and enrich the education system. Here in Nicaragua there is a huge education deficit, especially in rural areas. This tutoring program is comprehensive and integral as it not only reinforces their homework and the course material they learn in the morning, but also strengthens their self-esteem and independent learning by taking them on excursions outside the community. Students tell me that this experience has changed their world!" – Doctora Reyna, Clinica Apoyo



THEORY OF CHANGE

With the input from all of the people involved with the Hotel con Corazón foundation (founders, (ex-)managers, board, new entrepreneurs, we created for the first time a Theory of Change to demonstrate and better understand the link between the different activities and aspects of our programs and how we hope to achieve our long-term goals and desired impact. We aim to finetune this further next year.

SENSEMAKING

Together with some of the stakeholders we discussed some of the patterns that emerged from the stories.

Positive change:

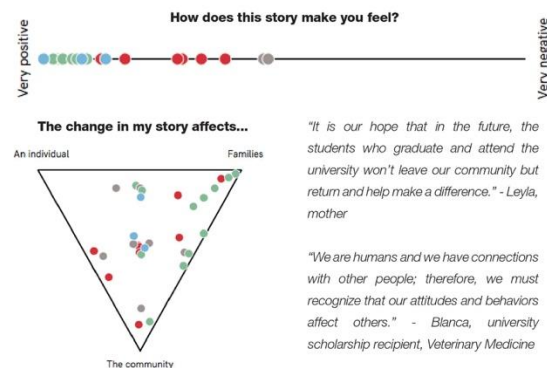
Participants shared that the enthusiasm and encouraging responses did not come as a surprise because people have experienced positive change: better communication, stronger relationships, more opportunities and improved awareness and knowledge.

"The programs of Hotel con Corazón have made a great impression on everyone involved. People feel proud and happy of the progress that has been made." - Victor, scholarship recipient

"These are all positive experiences. People believe that these programs have helped them to grow and to see things in a different way from what they have learned in other places." - María Belén, Education coordinator

Collective impact:

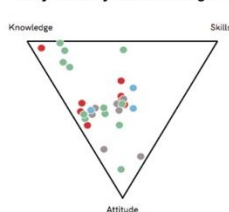
Participants noticed that most stories represent a change on a more collective level – influencing families and the community as a whole. They noted that when individuals change, then most likely this improves family relationships and the community as well. They stressed the importance of family and unity in Nicaraguan culture, which is why home visits and involvement of parents has been critical to the success of the program.



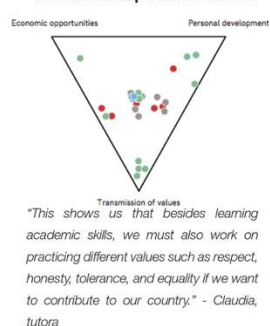
Beyond knowledge:

The majority of the stories describe a change in knowledge and attitude. Tutors, parents and students shared that they were more motivated and learned important values, as well as new knowledge. Scholarship recipients shared that through their hotel experience, they were better able to apply and develop skills related to their knowledge.

The change that I describe in my story is mainly about a change in



Education is important because....



Balanced education:

Participants explained that all factors are connected and there is a balance between the three.

"This demonstrates that if a person doesn't have values, then he or she will not be able to achieve full personal development, and thus will not be able to obtain economic opportunities to benefit themselves and their families." - Leyla, mother

You will find more patterns and the stories behind it in the interactive Sprockler report: www.reports.sprockler.com/hotelconcorazon

OTHER IMPACT

In this impact analysis, we focused on the educational programs. Hotel con Corazón also initiates other activities that benefit the community.

Social impact:

The Hotel serves as a popular venue for social projects to convene and share ideas, expertise and experiences, including in 2016:

- The Reading Workshop for 80 adults from around the country.
- Positive Discipline Workshop for educators and parents.
- UP Nicaragua Girl's Empowerment Retreat for two groups.
- Salsa classes where tourists and local meet.

Environmental impact:

We strive to keep our ecological footprint small.

- A local farmer collects all of our food waste and uses it to feed his 12 pigs, contributing to his livelihood and the environment.
- We recycle as much as we can and leave only a very small amount of trash that needs to be collected by the city.
- We recently switched from plastic to environmentally friendly cloth bags for laundry.



Economic impact:

We are proud of our progress and contributions to the local economy.

- We provide jobs, good working conditions and support for a staff of 22.
- We fund the professional development of our employees by offering an extra 10% of their salary to be used towards education for themselves or their children. Since the program started, nearly half of the 45 employees have received this bonus. Two people have graduated with university degrees in tourism/ hospitality management and systems engineering, and three of the tutors will complete their Master's degrees in Education in July 2017.
- We buy our fruits and vegetables from local vendors to support and stimulate the local economy.



NEXT STEPS

Based on the results of the study, we identified some areas that we want to continue to build upon in order to grow and improve. We will:

- Continue to foster our partnerships and relationships with parents, students and other local NGOs.
- Implement a structured training for the tutors in innovative education techniques both from external professionals who can carry out the trainings, as well as sending the tutors to trainings so that they can come back and train the others.
- Improve our monitoring and evaluation system and build upon our records system and data collection, including digitalizing everything for better access and communication with participants and former participants.
- Involve parents even more through interactive and participatory workshops based on their learning wishes.
- Improving our tutoring classes for secondary students increasing the amount of time we spend with them.
- Search a solution for our lack of adequate space for secondary tutoring. Include more empowerment workshops for secondary students about goal-setting, personal strengths, and vocational training.
- Strengthen relationships with teachers of San Pablo and Bertha Gutierrez so that we can grow together and have a deeper impact.

We would like to thank the SPROCKLER-team for support and coaching. Photo's by Armando Rudez. Design by Gil Crielaard and Sophie Barkmeijer. Read about our future plans in Leon and Mexico on www.hotelconcorazonworldwide.com. For more information, please visit our website www.hotelconcorazon.com.



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